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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 000062

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/09/2016

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [MV](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: MALDIVES: ELEMENTS OF GOVERNMENT AT ODDS OVER  
PRESS FREEDOM

REF: A. 2005 COLOMBO 1823

[B.](#) 2005 COLOMBO 2025

[C.](#) USDAO COLOMBO IIR 6 816 0033 06

Classified By: DCM JAMES ENTWISTLE FOR REASONS 1.4(b) and (d)

[¶1.](#) (C) Summary. On December 28, Sri Lankan police, apparently acting on a request from Maldivian authorities via Interpol, searched the Colombo office of the pro-opposition Minivan News for evidence that Minivan staff were engaged in seditious activities and/or gun-running. Although the search yielded no evidence and Minivan staff were told the investigation was dropped, the news agency has ceased its internet-based radio program, and some journalists have since moved to the UK, where they continue to maintain the website.

In separate discussions after the incident, the Maldivian Foreign Minister and Attorney General reiterated to emboffs their government's continued commitment to democratic reform and criticized the raid, with the Foreign Minister suggesting that conservative elements within the Government of the Republic of Maldives (GORM) may be attempting to undermine the reform agenda. End summary.

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RAID ON MINIVAN'S COLOMBO OFFICE:

SEARCH YIELDS NO DEROGATORY EVIDENCE

[¶2.](#) (SBU) On December 28, police from Sri Lanka's Interpol Liaison Unit and Criminal Investigative Division served a search warrant on the Colombo office of Minivan News on charges of seditious activity and gun running. (Note: The independent Minivan News organization, formerly affiliated with the opposition Maldives Democratic Party (MDP), runs a website and an internet-based news radio program as well as the only pro-opposition daily newspaper in Maldives. End note.) Two Minivan reporters, along with Jude Laing, a British lawyer for the opposition MDP, were at the office during the search. In a meeting with poloff later the same day, Laing said the police told him the warrant was based on a request from the Maldivian authorities on suspicion of gun running and seditious activity. Laing said the Sri Lankan police, whom he described as courteous and professional, examined the premises and computers and asked the reporters about the radio news program. Laing said the police also asked whether anyone at the office had links to airline pilots or could be involved in illegal activities, to which the reporters answered no. After approximately two hours at the Minivan office, the police reportedly told Laing they had uncovered no derogatory information, would report as much to the Maldivian government, and the investigation was closed.

[¶3.](#) (C) In a December 29 meeting with poloff, an American contractor who works with law enforcement officials in Colombo said that his police contacts informed him the request for the investigation had been signed by Maldivian Chief of Police Adam Zahir and sent to the Interpol Liaison Desk. The contractor said the Sri Lankan police suspected the charges were politically motivated, but were compelled to follow up because of their serious nature.

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OPPOSITION JOURNALISTS VIEW MINIVAN RAID  
AS LATEST ATTACK ON PRESS FREEDOM

[¶4.](#) (U) Although Sri Lankan police informed Minivan staff that the investigation was completed, Minivan journalist Paul Roberts, a British national, told poloff in a December 28 meeting that the Maldivian staff, who are used to a society in which police wield great power, nonetheless no longer felt comfortable working in the Colombo office. Roberts and another Minivan journalist have since gone to the UK, where they continue to maintain the website. They are also working with Reporters Without Borders and the Commonwealth Press Union to draw attention to press freedom concerns in Maldives. Minivan's representatives have succeeded in drawing broad attention to their plight, gaining coverage from the BBC and the Guardian in addition to a report in Sri Lanka's Sunday Times.

[¶5.](#) (U) According to Minivan staff, since the newspaper registered in June, seven out of fifteen of its print

journalists have been under investigation by Maldivian authorities, and in April Roberts was banned from traveling to Maldives based on alleged links to terrorism (Ref A). Despite this, the daily newspaper continues to operate freely in Maldives. Several Minivan employees attended a PD-sponsored journalism workshop in Male' on January 5, at the invitation of the Ministry of Information. The editor in Male' told Embassy Information Officer that she had not been asked to stop printing. Nevertheless, Minivan continues to print in a small format, rather than as a normal newspaper, after arson threats against its printer in August.

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REFORM-MINDED MINISTERS REITERATE COMMITMENT  
TO "NEW MALDIVES" DEMOCRATIZATION  
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¶ 16. (C) In a January 3 phone conversation with poloff, Maldivian Foreign Minister Ahmed Shaheed called the Minivan raid in Colombo "utterly shameful." He said he had been upset by news of it and had phoned Police Chief Adam Zahir to ask why it had occurred. Shaheed reported that Zahir posited he had nothing to do with the raid, which he claimed was based solely on intelligence reports. Shaheed expressed concern that the raid undermined the "New Maldives" agenda he and several other reform-minded Ministers are promoting. Describing the police chief as "someone we are at war with," Shaheed added that he had encouraged the President to shift Zahir from his current position. (Note: As reported Ref C, some high-level changes in the police may indeed be impending. End note.) Shaheed said he did not want elements within his own government to "torpedo" the reform process from within.

¶ 17. (C) During a January 6 call on the DCM in Colombo, Maldivian Attorney General Hassan Saeed also said that he was "disappointed" by the investigation of Minivan's Colombo office. He said that when the Home Minister asserted there was credible, detailed intelligence linking Minivan's Colombo staff to a weapons smuggling operation, Saeed had asked him to make that information available to the public. The Attorney General noted that faulty intelligence may have caused the problem. He also stated his intent to engage with pro-opposition journalists based in Colombo to reassure them about the Government's commitment to press freedom. Addressing the reform process at large, Saeed told the DCM, "There is no question of (the reformists) losing. The conservatives will lose. The President himself proposed these reforms, and he is backing the New Maldives."

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COMMENT:  
RIFT BETWEEN "OLD" AND "NEW" MALDIVES WITHIN THE GORM  
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¶ 18. (C) Comment: On December 16, Foreign Minister Shaheed, Attorney General Saeed, Justice Minister Mohamed Jameel Ahmed, and Information Minister Mohamed Nasheed held a press conference in Colombo to present the reform package comprising the "New Maldives." That the Minivan raid and pursuant publicity comes so soon after the "New Maldives" roll-out reflects poorly on the Government of Republic of Maldives (GORM). Foreign Minister Shaheed seems acutely conscious of this. While the Attorney General was more circumspect, suggesting the disconnect lay with "faulty intelligence," the rifts between the reform-minded elements and the "old guard" within the GORM seem to be widening. The GORM remains sensitive to international scrutiny, and the latest press coverage may exert some pressure on the GORM's reform-minded elements to make sure their voices- and actions- drown out the input from the "old Maldives." End comment.  
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